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Sustainability in World Education's UXO Education and Awareness Program in Lao PDR

World Education's work in Laos, one of the most heavily bombed countries in the world, offers an example of effective implementation of unexploded-ordnance-risk awareness at all levels. This article explores World Education's work with the government of Laos in achieving higher levels of UXO-risk awareness.

by Barbara Lewis and Sarah Bruinooge [World Education]

The Lao People's Democratic Republic has been described as the most bombed country in the world per capita.¹ An estimated 414,000 cluster bombs, delivering 260 million submunitions, were dropped on the country between 1965 and 1973 during the height of the American-Vietnam War.² In addition, various other forms of ordnance, such as mortar shells, artillery shells, hand grenades and landmines, were used during the war, adding up to nearly an estimated two million U.S. tons of ordnance dropped on Laos. Up to 30 percent of this material did not explode at the time. Now, 40 years later, it remains potentially active, continuing to affect the lives of farmers and inquisitive children.

Children are frequently injured by unexploded ordnance they find because the ball-shaped cluster bombs look like toys, and their natural curiosity leads them to explore out-of-the-way places. A typical UXO accident occurs when children are digging for crickets or worms, poking in the mud for crabs, pulling up bamboo shoots and burning small backyard fires. To combat the prevalence of injuries to children from UXO, World Education, in conjunction with the Lao Ministry of Education, has designed and implemented a school-based curriculum. The curriculum provides information on the dangers of UXO and clear instructions for children in the event that they discover UXO. The UXO Education and Awareness Program has been implemented since 1996 through funding from United States Agency for International Development, UNICEF, the Lao National Regulatory Authority and the U.S. Department of State's Office of Weapons Removal and Abatement in the Bureau of Political-Military Affairs.

World Education strives to ensure that effective UXO-awareness programs will continue in Laos, focusing efforts on sustainability and long-term implementation. Although UXO clearance is a high priority for development and poverty-reduction strategies, it is a labor-intensive process that will continue for many years. With this in mind, World Education has pursued several strategies to achieve sustainability. As described below, these strategies include developing host-country capacity by training teachers, administrative school staff and government staff; working at multiple levels within communities; and encouraging the Ministry of Education to integrate UXO-awareness programming into the national curriculum, particularly in the provinces most heavily affected.

Description of Program

The UXO Education and Awareness Program targets primary schools in districts with high ordnance contamination, as identified in the "Living with UXO" survey published by UXO Lao and Handicap



Children piece together sentences about the dangers of UXO.
PHOTO COURTESY OF BARBARA LEWIS

International in 1997. World Education partners with the Ministry of Education at both national and provincial levels to provide teacher training in the use of a specialized curriculum and in a student-centered teaching methodology that encourages student inquiry and interactive participation. The curriculum currently consists of illustrated storybooks for younger grades and more advanced texts for grades 4 and 5. Model lesson plans based on participatory teaching and learning methods, make use of a variety of materials and instruct teachers using a step-by-step guide to classroom activities. Teachers also learn to instruct students about the dangers of UXO through the creative arts with techniques including posters, songs, puppets, storybooks and drama. The program is expanding to more schools and training more teachers every year. In the 2007–08 school year, the program reached 1,700 schools, comprised of 4,900 teachers and 147,000 students in 37 districts in nine provinces.

Developing Host-country Capacity

The project focuses on building sustainability through multiple channels. One important component of sustainability is the involvement of Lao education staff and administrators in the management of the project, including actively building the skills of staff, partners and project beneficiaries, participation in decision-making processes and facilitation of meetings to review challenges and progress.

Teacher training is crucial; new schools and teachers entering the program frequently have little experience with conducting activity-based, child-centered curricula. Although teachers are aware of UXO in their communities, few know how to address the issue of UXO education and awareness effectively in their classrooms. When the program enters a new district, teacher training starts with the province, and district-level government education staff attend a train-the-trainers session. Training for teachers in a new district is then organized at the district or subdistrict level. The initial week-long session includes general information about the problem of UXO, types of UXO found in Lao PDR, the impact of UXO injuries and deaths in the community, and how the community members can protect themselves. Teachers then break into groups to review the lesson materials for each grade level and practice teaching the lessons to other teachers in the group.

In addition to working with government staff at the province and district levels, the project also emphasizes working with school administrators and senior staff. During the 2008–09 school year, the program has focused on training school directors and experienced teachers so they are able to train new teachers coming from the teacher colleges and provide refresher training to teachers who have previously attended UXO education training.

Lao Ministry of Education coordinators provide guidance and participate in all planning, assessment and decision-making for the project. World Education Laos' national staff provide on-the-job training and guidance for developing these skills through mentoring coordinators, senior teachers and school administrators to develop the skills to pass on their knowledge. The project develops personal and professional capacity that will ensure all children in UXO-contaminated areas understand the risks and know how to respond when they encounter UXO.

Working in Communities

Although the UXO Education and Awareness Program is primarily a school-based program, sustainability is also pursued by working in collaboration with other entities

in the community. Whenever possible, UXO Lao, the Lao government partner involved in both clearance and community awareness, joins teacher training activities so that teachers understand what services UXO Lao can provide. Their presence also creates a sense of familiarity so that if a student reports a piece of UXO, the teacher knows whom to contact to have the ordnance destroyed.

The community-awareness activities of the education program and UXO Lao complement each other. The in-school program provides continuing education to children, while the UXO Lao community-awareness program targets out-of-school children and adults. UXO Lao also provides some in-school activities, which further reinforce the lessons of the World Education in-school program.

Ministry of Education and World Education staff meet with community leaders to talk about the program when following up on activities or during teacher-training sessions. Because of the combined impact of the UXO Education and Awareness Program and UXO Lao Community Awareness programs, adults understand more about the UXO problems in their villages. In addition, the adults often learn about the content of the UXO school program because their children enjoy re-enacting the lessons they learned in the classroom. Only by engaging *all* community members and ensuring that everyone knows the dangers of UXO can the message be firmly conveyed to children.

Government Partnerships

On an institutional and national level, World Education has established and maintains strong government partnerships, which are critical to the success of any development project. World Education, the Ministry of Education and the National Regulatory Authority have been discussing a five-year strategic plan to mainstream UXO education into the long-term plans of the Ministry of Education. This discussion is ongoing and part of a collaborative program-management process for the project. The complex mainstreaming process must consider all elements of the project, including planning of activities, monitoring and follow-up, teacher training within existing training programs, and development of new materials. To this end, World Education will continue to emphasize its productive relationships with government partners.

The Future

Educating children and communities about the dangers of UXO remains a priority in Lao PDR. World Education and other organizations currently implement many effective programs in UXO awareness and accident

prevention, but focus must continue to be on making these programs sustainable for the future. World Education will continue to improve and refine its sustainability plans and explore new options for ensuring long-term implementation of UXO-education programming in Lao PDR. ♦

See Endnotes, Page 112



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